

Developing Positive Assertiveness

Practical Techniques for Personal Success

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Three Basic Behavior Styles

It would be great if you could simply decide to go down the road marked "Assertive" and live your life without straying from the path. Real life is full of twists and turns, however, and no one is consistently assertive. All of us use the following three basic behavior styles, depending on the situation and personal factors. The good news is that you can learn to become more assertive more of the time.

Nonassertive

Nonassertive behavior is passive and indirect. It communicates a message of inferiority. By being nonassertive, we allow the wants, needs, and rights of others to be more important than our own. Nonassertive behavior helps create "Win-Lose" situations. A person behaving nonassertively loses (or is at best disregarded), while allowing others to win. Following this road leads to being a victim, not a winner.

Aggressive

Aggressive behavior is more complex. It can be either active or passive. Aggression can be direct or indirect, honest or dishonest-but it always communicates an impression of superiority and disrespect. By being aggressive, we put our wants, needs, and rights above those of others. We attempt to get our way by not allowing others a choice. Aggressive behavior is usually inappropriate and it violates the rights of others. People who behave aggressively get ahead at the expense of others, and in doing so set themselves up for retaliation. No one likes a bully.

Assertive

Assertive behavior is active, direct, and honest. It communicates an impression of Self-respect and respect for others. By being assertive, we view our wants, needs, is as equal to those of others. We work toward "win-win" outcomes. An assertive person wins by influence, listening, and negotiating so that others choose to cooperate willingly. This behavior leads to success without retaliation, and encourages open, honest relationships.

Can Behaviors Change?

Do you believe you can't change your basic personality? If so, you and the experts agree. Most experts concur that a general personality type cannot be changed. Once you have developed your basic personality (between ages five and 12) your most natural psychological characteristics do not really change much.

If this is the case, you might ask, "Is it a waste of time to engage in self-improvement?" The answer is no! Even if your core characteristics stay the same, It is possible to change many things about yourself. Things you can change Include your beliefs, attitudes, goals, expectations, word choices, and body language. Modestly changing any of these factors can result in your being assertive more often. When this happens, you win!

Before you figure out in which direction you need to travel, it will be helpful if You understand your starting point. Answer the items on the next page (as honestly as you can) to gain a better awareness of your personality characteristics. Your natural response will provide the most accurate insights.

The Five Ps of Successful Change

Any change, large or small, is challenging. For many people, significant change occurs only after some traumatic experience. You don't have to wait for a traumatic event to trigger change, however. You do need to be prepared for change in order to ensure that change will be successful. The following guidelines will help guarantee any successful changes you wish to make.

1. Protection.

Change is often scary! Have you ever made a New Year's resolution and failed to keep it? One reason we don't change, even when we truly want to, is fear. Often our fear is vague and unidentified, but it is enough to sabotage making a change. Protection can help you stick with a commitment to change. Here are some protection suggestions:

- Start your change in your safest environment.
- Change one thing at a time—slow and easy does it.
- Whenever you feel unsure or anxious, answer the following questions:

"What's the worst that can happen?"

"What's the probability that it will happen?"

"What can I do to prevent it or lower the probability?"

2. Potency.

Change is an active process, not a passive one. To activate your personal power, it is necessary to invest some mental effort, emotional involvement, and physical activity to changing. You can learn to tap into your potency if you do the following:

- Define your change goal in simple, active, positive words.
- Write your change goal and post it where you see it daily
- Imagine yourself practicing your change goal and visualize yourself doing it well.
- Tell yourself daily, "I can...", "I will...", and "I am..."

3. Permission.

Each of us requires permission to change. Be sure to give yourself permission, and get permission from significant others in your life who will be affected by your changes. Without their permission and support, you may not succeed.

Tell each person what you plan to do and why. Ask each, "Is that okay with you?" Most significant others will appreciate your consideration of their involvement with your changes. Most will support you when you ask. If someone says no, determine the reason for the reluctance. It might be an important issue to explore and could help you redefine your change goal.

You do not need permission to change from everyone who is important in your life, but having it will ease the pressure on you and normally result in a better support system. Successful people know to accept the help and support of others!

4. Practice.

Whether learning to ride a bicycle, program a computer, play a musical instrument, or use assertive behavior, an intellectual comprehension of the concepts is not all it takes. (Sorry, all you thinkers!) To become skillful with any behavior requires practice. A great deal of practice may be needed before a new behavior becomes natural and integrated.

- Decide what to practice and how it can be best accomplished.
- Develop a practice schedule. Be specific about how often, when, and where. Record your efforts.
- Allow yourself to make mistakes. Remember: It is practice; you don't have to be perfect!

5. Proof.

When your practice goes well and you experience satisfaction, you are receiving proof that you can change. This valuable reinforcement encourages you to continue. New behavior must be reinforced repeatedly with positive experiences (proof) to keep the process working and ensure a permanent change.

- Ask others to give you positive feedback about your practice.

- Give yourself "pats on the back" with positive self-talk.
- Establish a practice schedule and reward yourself for keeping your commitment. Give yourself a reward just for practicing. You don't have to be completely changed to deserve some positive reinforcement.

Choosing Assertive Words Carefully

Now that you have an understanding about how to change your thinking and feeling patterns, you need some information about changing your behavior.

To communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions assertively, you need to choose words that are direct, honest, appropriate, and respectful. Some words simply do not fit these criteria and therefore cannot be delivered assertively. Words are only one aspect of being assertive, but you must use assertive words if you are to be assertive with others.

Guidelines for Assertive Word Choice

Use I" statements, rather than "you" statements.

Compare the following:

"You always interrupt my stories!" (Aggressive)

"I would like to tell my stories without interruption." (Assertive)

Use factual descriptions instead of judgments or exaggerations.

Compare the following:

"If you don't change your attitude, you're going to be in real trouble." (Aggressive)

"If you continue to arrive after 8:00 a.m., I will be required to place you on two days' probation without pay." (Assertive)

Express thoughts, feelings, and opinions reflecting ownership.

Compare the following:

"He makes me angry!" (Denies ownership of feelings)

"I get angry -when he breaks his promises!" (Assertive and owns feelings)

"The only sensible policy is to match the competition" (States opinion as fact; aggressive, controlling)

"I believe matching the competition is the best policy." (Owns opinion; assertive)

"Don't you think we should table this for now?" (Passive, indirect, denies ownership)

Use clear, direct requests or directives (commands) when you want others to do something, rather than hinting, being indirect, or presuming.

Compare the following:

"Would you mind taking this to John?" (Indirect, only inquires about willingness)

"Will you please take this to John?" (Assertive request)

"Please take this to John." (Assertive directive)

"Why don't you stop on the way home and pick up milk?" (Indirect, encourages the other to think about not doing it)

"Will you please pick up milk on your way home?" (Assertive request)

"Please pick up milk on your way home." (Assertive directive)

Being Direct and Honest

People avoid being direct and honest because they have learned it is impolite or pushy. Unfortunately, while attempting to avoid being inappropriate, we sometimes choose words that communicate a lack of respect. Sometimes we are so "careful" we don't communicate the real message.

When we say "Don't you think..." instead of "I think," we are communicating indirectly. If you really listen to the words, they sound condescending. When you ask, "Why don't you..." instead of "Will you," you are literally asking a person to find reasons not to. When you say, "I need..." and presume someone will take care of your needs, you communicate a lack of respect or an air of superiority. If you say "I need" or "I want," learn to add a request or directive in order to be assertive.

These may seem like picky details. You might say, "Most people know what is meant when I use those words, so what's the difference?" The difference is that you may be getting expected results only because people are able to figure out your unexpressed intentions. You may not be getting their respect. Continuing to use improper wording reinforces old habits and interferes with your being truly assertive. You can increase your success rate and improve relationships by using the direct, honest, assertive words.

SOME DO'S AND DON'TS

Following are some do's and don'ts for assertive word selection.

Do

- Say no politely and firmly
- Express feelings honestly
say "I'm angry"; "I'm disappointed"; "I'm delighted"; "I enjoy being with you"
- Be realistic, respectful, and honest
say "This is the third straight month your report has been late"
say "Thank you for asking. I prefer no smoking in my car."
- Express preferences and priorities
say "I don't have a particular movie to suggest. I do want to avoid ones with violence."

Don't

- Don't say "I can't" or "I won't be able to."
- Don't depersonalize feelings or deny ownership, by saying:
"You make me mad"; "That's disappointing"
"That's delightful"; "You make me feel so good"
- Don't exaggerate, minimize, or use sarcasm, by saying:
"You are never on time with your reports."
"Uh, okay, we wouldn't want to strain your will power!"
- Don't defer to be sociable or agree unwillingly, by saying:
"I don't care—whatever everyone else wants is okay with me"

Four Steps to Assertive Communication

Even if you successfully choose assertive words, correctly assess the other person's personality type and the style of assertiveness to which they might best respond, and deliver your words with the appropriate body language, there is no guarantee that the other person will respond with the desired cooperative response! You never have more than 50% of the control in any human interaction, and the other person may ignore your skillful assertiveness.

This is when you need to be prepared to increase the power of your assertiveness. You continue to be assertive, but you become a little more insistent, ^ a little more emotional, or a little more commanding to ensure that you get what you want in the situation. Think of it as "power steps" -you start at the bottom step, which is basic assertive behavior; and if that does not work, you take one step up in power. If that does not work, you take another step, and another, if needed. At no point do you have to resort to aggressive behavior.

Step 1: Repeat the Question or Statement

One way to add power to your assertiveness is to repeat your first communication. Some have referred to this as the broken record. You ask the same question or make the same statement. Make sure that you have good eye contact and that you speak with confident, assertive voice tones. You may want to emphasize certain words the second time to increase the chances of getting your point across.

Assertive statements: *'Will you please tell me how to find Mr. Green's office? (No response from the other person)*

"Will you please tell me how to find Mr. Green's office?"

Step 2: Command, Don't Ask

If the other person continues to ignore you or refuses to cooperate, switch from asking to commanding. To most people, a directive sounds more powerful than a request. Therefore, learn to use the requester the majority of people (the most notable exception being the directing/guiding type of person). The average person will hear your request as polite and appropriate, there is less risk of sounding pushy, and you can change to a command if the request does not produce results.

Assertive statement: "Please give me directions to Mr. Green's office."

Before considering other ways to increase the power of your assertiveness, practice escalating your assertiveness just a little when your first effort is not successful.

Situation: Commanding

You are participating in a staff meeting and want to make a point about the topic being discussed. Assume a topic and write your assertive statement below:

Alas, no one responds. Perhaps they have not heard you, or they may be choosing to ignore you. If you choose to repeat the original statement, write below which words you would emphasize to add a small amount of power.

Still no one responds! Write below what you would say to be even more emphatic about your point, without becoming aggressive.

Now ask someone to evaluate your practice efforts to verify that you have been assertive each time.

Step 3: Add Emotion

If your efforts are still unsuccessful, you can express your emotions as another way to add power to your assertiveness. People are unaccustomed to others expressing emotions openly and honestly, and by doing so you add considerable power to your communication.

Assertive statements: *"I suggest that we bring in a consultant to help us with this."* (No response from the others)

"I suggest that we bring in a consultant to help us with this." (Still no response)

"Please tell me what you think of my suggestion to bring in a consultant to help us." (No response or a dismissive response)

"Now I'm getting angry! Please give me a serious response to my suggestion."

You will probably get some attention with the last one! This level of assertiveness would be inappropriate earlier in the process, but after three attempts to be heard, it is quite appropriate. Not only will it result in respectful attention, it will likely produce apologies from the others. You do not have to apologize for expressing your emotions, and it is recommended that you do not. You are completely within your rights to respond emotionally if you do not receive respectful responses from others when you are making a serious effort to communicate assertively. Apologies diminish your power. If you do receive the response you desire, it is a good idea to express appreciation.

Situation: Adding Emotion

Assume that you are asking someone to assist you with a task or project, or that you are asking for another person's ideas or preferences. Write your request below.

Assume that you get no response or an insincere one. Write a command version below.

Assume that this second effort receives no better response. Write an assertive communication in which you express your feelings about the situation.

Now ask someone to evaluate your practice efforts to be sure that you have been assertive each time.

You may be tempted by now to become aggressive in order to get your needs met, but please do not yield to this temptation. By remaining assertive, you have a better chance of getting cooperation without the risk of retaliation. When you use aggression to get your way, you must be prepared to receive aggression in return from the person whose rights you violated!

Step 4: Introduce Consequences

A final way to add power to your assertiveness is to introduce consequences. Consequences are not threats, because they are not harmful or inappropriate. They are simply statements of what you intend to do if you do not get the cooperation or results you desire. Following are some criteria for successful consequences.

- Consequences need to be stated in advance. The other person deserves an opportunity to change his or her behavior to prevent the consequence. Taking an action without prior notice could be interpreted as inappropriate and aggressive.
- Consequences need to be strong but believable. The action needs to be something undesirable, but if it is too extreme, the other person will not believe that you will actually do it. Empty threats are ignored.
- You must be prepared to follow through and implement the consequence if necessary. If the other person decides to test you and you do not take the action you said you would, you lose credibility and power for dealing with this person in the future. He or she may also tell others, and you will lose credibility with them, too.

Some Examples

After several attempts to get someone to stop taking things from your desk without permission:

"If you take anything else from my desk without asking first, I will inform the department manager and the security office about this repeated pattern."

After you have asked one of your car pool drivers to stay within the speed limit and stop following cars too closely:

"Pat, I really am uncomfortable -with your driving so fast and following other cars so closely. If you continue to do this, I will drop out of the car pool."

Situation: Introducing Consequences

Assume that you have purchased an expensive new suit. The purchase price included alterations. You were in a hurry and did not try on the suit. When you put it on the next day, you discovered that the sleeves were a little too long, there were a couple of wrinkles across the shoulders, and the waist was a little too loose. You have decided to return the suit for additional alteration and expect this additional tailoring to be free. How will you word your original request?

Assume that you are told that additional alterations will cost another \$35. What will you say to get the store representative to provide the alterations at no charge?

Assume that this effort fails. The salesperson informs you that the store's policy requires that additional alterations made after the customer has accepted the clothing must be paid for, and he (or she) does not have the authority to break this rule. What will you say?

Assume that this third attempt is not successful. Write a statement of consequences in the space below.
